



# MAYOR AND COUNCIL AGENDA

NO. 12

DEPT.: Recreation and Parks /

STAFF CONTACT: Burt Hall, Director of R&P

DATE PREPARED: March 17, 2005

FOR MEETING OF: April 4, 2005

**SUBJECT:** Naming of King Farm 28-Acre Park for Mattie J. T. Stepanek

**RECOMMENDATION:** The Recreation and Park Advisory Board and City staff recommend naming the King Farm 28-Acre Park for King Farm resident Mattie J. T. Stepanek.

**DISCUSSION:** The Mayor and Council and the Recreation and Park Advisory Board have received proposals and expressions of support to name the King Farm 28-acre park for Mattie J. T. Stepanek, from numerous King Farm residents, including a representative group from the King Farm Assembly and the King Farm Homeowners Association. The Recreation and Park Advisory Board considered this proposal at their March 24, 2005 meeting, after meeting with representatives from the King Farm Homeowner's association. The Board found that this proposal meets all of the criteria of the City's Park Naming Policy and voted [unanimously] to recommend to the Mayor and Council that this proposal be approved to name the King Farm 28-acre park for Mattie J. Stepanek.

Mattie J. Stepanek, who passed away in June of 2004 after a long struggle with a rare muscular disease, lived in King Farm with his mother, Jeni. In addition to writing several books, each of which made the New York Times Bestseller List, Mattie was a friend to the famous and powerful. Former President Jimmy Carter delivered the eulogy at Mattie's funeral and he was a guest on the Oprah Winfrey Show. At Mattie's funeral, President Carter told the congregation that since leaving the White House he had visited 122 countries, he had met prime ministers, kings, queens and presidents, but Mattie was the most remarkable person he had ever met. At the time of his death Mattie was working on a new book with President Carter, to be titled Just Peace. Mattie was also the National Goodwill Ambassador for the Muscular Dystrophy Association.

Mattie's mother, Jeni, has expressed her enthusiastic support for naming the park for her son. She is quoted in the attached article from The Town Courier as follows: "Mattie was somebody who stood for the future....what love is about.....I hope it happens so his spirit of peace, friendship and community will live for a long time."

A "Google" search for Mattie J.T. Stepanek yields more than 10,000 websites.

**Options Considered:** Other options for park names were considered informally, but given the

strength and support for naming the park for Mattie J. T. Stepanek, other options were dropped.

**Fiscal Impact:** none

**Change in Law or Policy:** n/a

**Boards and Commissions Review:** The Recreation and Park Advisory Board considered this proposal at their March 24, 2005 meeting. The Board voted [unanimously] to recommend to the Mayor and Council that this proposal be approved to name the King Farm 28-acre park for Mattie J. T. Stepanek.

**Next Steps:** City staff will continue to work with Mattie Stepanek's mother and representatives from the community to plan a fitting dedication of the park. Staff will work with King Farm community members to put into practice a number of other proposed tributes:

- Inclusion of activities in the park for physically challenged persons. [The park is slated to have a handicap accessible playground and a "Bankshot" basketball court. Bankshot is a game that may be played equally by persons with physical disabilities as well as "fully able" persons.
- Creation of a statue of Mattie in his wheelchair with his service dog, Micah, to be located in the park. [There will be a 1% Art in Architecture" contribution for this project. Staff will work with community members and the Cultural Arts Commission to explore this proposal.]
- Holding an annual event among local schools which will recognize Mattie's passionate desire for peace.
- One or two park signs will be produced and installed at the undeveloped park site recognizing the official naming.

**PREPARED BY:**

  
Burt Hall, Director of Recreation and Parks

3.23.05  
Date

**APPROVED BY:**

  
Scott Ullery, City Manager

3/23/05  
Date

**LIST OF ATTACHMENTS:**

- Park Naming Policy
- Letter in support from King Farm Assembly and King Farm Homeowners Association
- E-mails from King Farm residents
- Printout from Mattie J.T. Stepanek's website
- "People" Magazine Article
- Article from The Town Courier newspaper

CITY OF ROCKVILLE  
DEPARTMENT OF RECREATION AND PARKS

PARK NAMING POLICY

Purpose: The purpose of this policy is to provide for various methods of naming and/or renaming park areas within the corporate city limits of Rockville, Maryland.

The policy also sets forth procedures by which the names of parks can be selected.

Criteria: In the following situations; new park acquisitions, requests for renaming existing park areas, donations of parkland, the following criteria will be used in determining an appropriate name for the park area involved.

1. A non-living person's name commemorating that person;
2. Historical events;
3. Great causes and ideas (independence, friendship, suffrage);
4. Geographical or archeological places;
5. The names of schools or adjacent subdivisions;
6. After a donor of a piece of parkland.

Additional criteria to be considered in selecting a name are:

- a. Name should become permanent.
- b. Concurrence and advice from Historical Society.
- c. No living persons should have a park named after them except in the case of donations.
- d. Park naming contests should be strictly a contingent process.
- e. Old names of existing parks should remain as is if they have been that way for five years or more.
- f. We should not be bound by developers' names.
- g. Each parcel should be evaluated individually and the proposed name should be weighed against each naming criterium.

Procedures: If a name has been recommended to the Park Board, then the Chairman of the Board will appoint an individual on the Board to review and test it against the criteria, and then make a recommendation to the Park Board. If a piece of park land does not have a name, then the Chairman will assign an individual to research the land parcel and develop a list of five possible alternative names which meet the criteria and then the Park Board will vote and determine which of the five is best and that in turn will be recommended to the Mayor and Council.

A majority vote of the Board would be required and a letter would be sent from the Chairman of the Park Board to the Mayor and Council recommending the name, and the Mayor and Council would then have the final authority for naming the park.

In any event, if the Mayor and Council does not approve of the name, the Park Board will then pursue the naming further.

Routed To:

☒ Council  
☐ City Clerk  
☐ City Manager

☐ City Attorney  
☐ Council Support Specialist

☒ Other Burt Hall

February 1, 2005

Mayor Giammo  
City Council Members  
Recreation and Parks Advisory Board  
Rockville City Hall  
111 Maryland Avenue  
Rockville, MD 20850

We respectfully request that the 28 acre Park to be constructed in King Farm be named The Mattie J.T. Stepanek Park at King Farm. Mattie lived with his mother, Jeni Stepanek, in King Farm for three years until he died in June, 2004, a month before his 14<sup>th</sup> birthday. Jeni continues to live here.

In his short life he deeply touched many lives through his poetry, countless television appearances and his enthusiasm for life in the very face of impending death due to the progressive effects of muscular dystrophy which had already taken his three older siblings. Jeni suffers from the adult form of the disease.

Perhaps Mattie's greatest desire in life was to be a peacemaker. He found President Carter a kindred soul in this goal and shared his views with him as a close friend. They were working together in a book which Mattie had titled "Just Peace"---because you could put the emphasis on either word. Jeni hopes to bring the book to publication. As part of our vision for making the park a living memorial, we have considered plans for an annual event among local schools which will recognize his passionate desire for peace.

At Mattie's funeral, President Carter told the congregation that since leaving the White House he and Rosalynn had visited 122 countries, he had met prime ministers, kings, queens, and presidents, but that Mattie was the most remarkable person he had ever met.

King farm was truly home to Mattie and his enthusiasm for it showed. He was loyal to the local stores. He visited babies at the playground in the Park. At Christmas he made small presents and left them at the doors in his building and the adjacent ones.

Mattie lived daily with serious physical challenges that most of us will never know. Rather than dimming his spirit, they seemed to empower it. Therefore, it is requested that the park include provision for some activities for physically challenged people like Mattie. Attracting physically challenged people to the park will be in itself a fitting tribute to his memory.


In addition, we plan to commission a statue of Mattie in his wheelchair with Micah, his service dog. Beside them will be a table with a chess game in progress. We would like to discuss the location of the statue with the Department of Recreation and Parks.

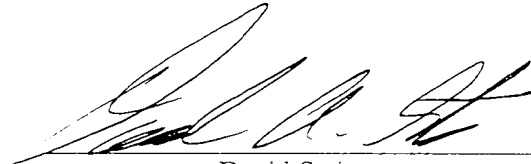
Mattie Stepanek was certainly a great credit to King Farm, the city of Rockville and the community at large. The undersigned represent a cross-section of the governing entities for the


community of King Farm. We believe, and we are sure our fellow residents in King Farm would agree, that it is altogether fitting that Mattie be both recognized and remembered in this way. The Mattie J.T. Stepanek Park at King Farm would aim to embody Mattie's dreams and aspirations for humanity.

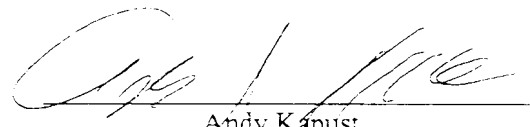
We have discussed these plans with Mattie's mother, Jeni Stepanek, and she is fully supportive.

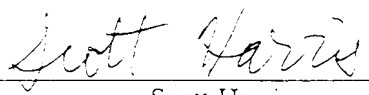
Your approval and encouragement will be greatly appreciated.

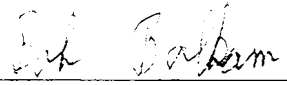
  
Alan Kaplan  
KF Civic Assn -  
Association

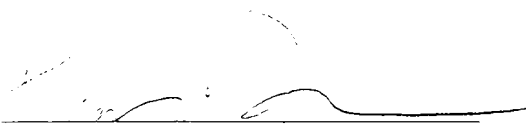
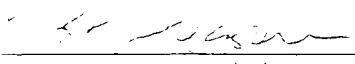
  
David Stein  
Chair, King Farm Citizens Assembly  
Association

  
Andy Gordon  
President, King Farm Assembly  
Association

  
Andy Kapust  
King Farm Conservancy  
Association

  
Scott Harris  
Homeowners Association  
Association

  
Bob Balkam  
Homeowners Association  
Association

  
Terry Sheehan  
  
Association

Cc: Burt Hail, Director Recreation and Parks



robertbalkam  
<robertbalkam@comcast.net>  
>  
01/27/2005 10:26 AM

To Burt Hall <BHall@rockvillemd.gov>  
cc Andy Gordon <andy@kingfarm.org>, Ted Wessel  
<tjwessel@earthlink.net>  
bcc  
Subject Congress Passes Resolution Honoring Mattie Stepanek

Dear Mr. Hall:

Thank you for your prompt reply to our e-mail. Ted Wessel told me that you might also be interested in the following.

Bob Balkam

HRES 695 EH

H. Res. 695

In the House of Representatives, U.S.,

July 22, 2004.

Whereas Mattie Stepanek was born on July 17, 1990, and was raised in Rockville, Maryland;

Whereas Mattie Stepanek had mitochondrial myopathy, a rare form of muscular dystrophy that affects heart rate, breathing, and digestion;

Whereas in 2002, 2003, and 2004, Mattie Stepanek served as the National Goodwill Ambassador for the Muscular Dystrophy Association (MDA), appearing with MDA National Chairman Jerry Lewis on the MDA Labor Day Telethon;

Whereas Mattie Stepanek was able to fulfill three of his dreams by publishing a book of poetry, meeting his hero, former President Jimmy Carter, and meeting Oprah Winfrey;

Whereas Mattie Stepanek has written five books of poetry, including Heartsongs, Journey Through Heartsongs, Hope Through Heartsongs, Celebrate Through Heartsongs, and Loving Through Heartsongs;

Whereas the poetry books written by Mattie Stepanek have sold more than 500,000 copies;

Whereas by the age of 13, Mattie Stepanek reached an 11th grade education level through home schooling; and

Whereas on June 22, 2004, Mattie Stepanek lost his fight with muscular dystrophy at Children's National Medical Center in Washington, District of Columbia: Now, therefore, be it

Resolved, That the House of Representatives--

(1) expresses its condolences to the family and friends of Mattie Stepanek on his passing; and

(2) honors the life of Mattie Stepanek for his braveness, generosity of spirit, and efforts to raise awareness of muscular dystrophy.



"Ted Task"  
<taskkfb@comcast.net>  
01/27/2005 10:16 AM

To <mayorcouncil@rockvillemd.gov>  
cc <bhall@rockvillemd.gov>  
bcc  
Subject Stapanek memorial

Both of us agree with the sentiments expressed in a petition/proposal regarding the possibility of a permanent memorial for Matti.  
The new park in King Farm is the perfect location. Thanks in advance for YOUR agreement and endorsement.

Ted & Anita Task  
500 King Farm Blvd.



Burt Hall/RKV  
02/15/2005 08:56 AM

To: WReznick@aol.com  
cc: Michelle Bean/RKV@RKV  
bcc:  
Subject: Re: Mattie's Park

Dear Mr. Reznick,

Thank you for your note regarding naming the King Farm 28-acre park for Mattie Stepanek. This proposal certainly has a great deal of merit. The process for naming City of Rockville parks involves a review by the Recreation and Park Advisory Board. The board makes a recommendation to the Mayor and Council who have final authority to establish park names. I am informed that the King Farm Civic Association is sending a letter to formally propose the park name. This, along with all other correspondence received on the matter, will be forwarded to the Recreation and Park Advisory Board for their consideration.

Again, thank you for taking the time to contact me with your recommendation.

\*\*\*\*\*

Burt Hall  
Director of Recreation and Parks  
City of Rockville, MD  
240-314-8602  
bhall@rockvillemd.gov

WReznick@aol.com



WReznick@aol.com  
02/13/2005 07:58 PM

To: bhall@rockvillemd.gov  
cc:  
Subject: Re: Mattie's Park

Dear Mr. Hall - I watched and admired Mattie for many years. I have all of his books and was lucky enough to meet him at Border's in Rockville - I don't believe I will ever meet or know someone as special as Mattie. His courage, his heart, his love, his strength and his words should never be forgotten and therefore, I am encouraging you to name the park after Mattie Stepanek. Very truly yours, Wendee Reznick





Burt Hall/RKV  
02/15/2005 11:37 AM

To: TCarcate@aol.com  
cc: Michelle Bean/RKV@RKV  
bcc:  
Subject: Re: One More Vote [1]

Dear Mr. Carcaterra and Ms. van Emmerick,

Thank you for your note regarding naming the King Farm 28-acre park for Mattie Stepanek. This proposal certainly has a great deal of merit. The process for naming City of Rockville parks involves a review by the Recreation and Park Advisory Board. The board makes a recommendation to the Mayor and Council who have final authority to establish park names. I am informed that the King Farm Civic Association is sending a letter to formally propose the park name. This, along with all other correspondence received on the matter, will be forwarded to the Recreation and Park Advisory Board for their consideration.

Again, thank you for taking the time to contact me with your recommendation.

\*\*\*\*\*

Burt Hall  
Director of Recreation and Parks  
City of Rockville, MD  
240-314-8602  
bhall@rockvillemd.gov

TCarcate@aol.com



TCarcate@aol.com  
02/12/2005 11:44 AM

To: bhall@rockvillemd.gov  
cc:  
Subject: One More Vote

Dear Mr. Burt Hall,


Please add us to the list of folks supporting the park in King Farm named after Mattie Stepanek.

Thanks,

Thomas A Carcaterra  
Tara van Emmerik  
309 Creek Valley Ln  
Rockville, MD 20850-5604



Burt Hall/RKV  
02/15/2005 08:57 AM

To: Chrisevbal@aol.com  
cc: Michelle Bean/RKV@RKV  
bcc:  
Subject: Re: Mattie Stepanek Park 

Dear Evelyn and Chris Balodemas,

Thank you for your note regarding naming the King Farm 28-acre park for Mattie Stepanek. This proposal certainly has a great deal of merit. The process for naming City of Rockville parks involves a review by the Recreation and Park Advisory Board. The board makes a recommendation to the Mayor and Council who have final authority to establish park names. I am informed that the King Farm Civic Association is sending a letter to formally propose the park name. This, along with all other correspondence received on the matter, will be forwarded to the Recreation and Park Advisory Board for their consideration.

Again, thank you for taking the time to contact me with your recommendation.

\*\*\*\*\*

Burt Hall  
Director of Recreation and Parks  
City of Rockville, MD  
240-314-8602  
bhail@rockvillemd.gov

Chrisevbal@aol.com



Chrisevbal@aol.com  
02/12/2005 01:55 PM

To: bhail@rockvillemd.gov  
cc:  
Subject: Mattie Stepanek Park

Burt Hall,

It would be a very inspiring tribute to Mattie for the park to be named in memory of him and his peaceful acts and vision.

Thank you and the staff of the parks and recreation board for supporting this act.

sincerely,

evelyn and chris balodemas      King Farm village center condo II



robertbalkam  
<robertbalkam@comcast.net>

01/26/2005 06:26 PM

To bhall@rockvillemd.gov

cc

bcc

Subject The Mattie J. T. Stepanek Park at King Farm

Mr. Burt Hall,  
Director of Recreation and Parks  
City of Rockville

Dear Mr. Hall:

We have known Mattie and Jeni Stepanek as neighbors for over two years.

As friends they have been two of the most unique people we have ever met. In addition, to see how Mattie has moved so many people all over the world through his poetry, television appearances and speeches is truly amazing. Just yesterday we had a letter from a good friend in Uganda who was enthusing about Mattie's books of poetry which he had received from a friend. We are still finding the friends he made in King Farm as he travelled around in his wheelchair.

Because of his deep ties to this community as well as his widespread and profound influence far beyond, it seems altogether fitting that the new park at King Farm should be named for him.

We appreciate your serious consideration of this request.

Robert M. Balkam  
800 Grand Champion Drive #102  
Rockville, MD 20850

Laurin C. Balkam



"Anne Robbins"  
<anner41@hotmail.com>  
01/27/2005 10:45 AM

To: taskkfb@comcast.net, mayorcouncil@rockvillemd.gov  
cc: bhall@rockvillemd.gov  
bcc:  
Subject: RE: Stapanek memorial

Ted and Anita: Good to hear from you. I think that naming the Park after Mattie Stepanek is a wonderful, visionary idea and you have my complete support. Anne Robbins

>From: "Ted Task" <taskkfb@comcast.net>  
>To: <mayorcouncil@rockvillemd.gov>  
>CC: <bhall@rockvillemd.gov>  
>Subject: Stapanek memorial  
>Date: Thu, 27 Jan 2005 10:16:58 -0500  
>  
>Both of us agree with the sentiments expressed in a petition/proposal  
>regarding the possibility of a permanent memorial for Matti.  
>  
>The new park in King Farm is the perfect location. Thanks in advance  
>for YOUR agreement and endorsement.  
>  
>  
>  
>Ted & Anita Task  
>  
>500 King Farm Blvd.  
>



Burt Hall/RKV  
01/27/2005 09:31 AM

To "Keely Smith" <ksmith@srgpe.com>  
cc Steve Mader/RKV@RKV, Rob Orndorff/RKV@RKV, Jerry Daus/RKV@RKV, Neil Greenberger/RKV@RKV  
bcc  
Subject Re: 28 acre park in King Farm after Mattie J.T. Stapanek

Dear Ms. Smith,

Thank you for your note regarding naming the King Farm 28-acre park for Mattie Stepanek. This proposal certainly has a great deal of merit. The process for naming City of Rockville parks involves a review by the Recreation and Park Advisory Board. The board makes a recommendation to the Mayor and Council who have final authority to establish park names. I am informed that the King Farm Civic Association is sending a letter to formally propose the park name. This, along with all other correspondence received on the matter, will be forwarded to the Recreation and Park Advisory Board for their consideration.

Again, thank you for taking the time to contact me with your recommendation.

\*\*\*\*\*  
Burt Hall  
Director of Recreation and Parks  
City of Rockville, MD  
240-314-8602  
bhall@rockvillemd.gov

"Keely Smith" <ksmith@srgpe.com>



"Keely Smith"  
<ksmith@srgpe.com>  
01/27/2005 09:08 AM

To <bhall@rockvillemd.gov>  
cc  
Subject 28 acre park in King Farm after Mattie J.T. Stapanek

This is just a note of support to name the new 28 acre park in King Farm after Mattie J.T. Stapanek. I am a King Farm resident and would feel very honored if the park was named after such an amazing, heroic and inspirational young man. Thank you.

Keely Smith  
Shulman Rogers Gandal Pordy & Ecker  
11921 Rockville Pike, Third Floor  
Rockville, Maryland 20850  
Tel: 301-230-6565 Ext. 5514  
Fax: 301-230-2891  
www.shulmanrogers.com

**MattieOnline.com***"Remember to play after every storm."*

about

news

pictures

facts

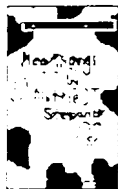
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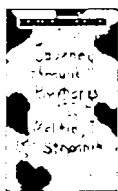
books

favorites

## Mattie's Books:



Heartsongs

Journey  
Through  
HeartsongsHope  
Through  
HeartsongsCelebrate  
Through  
HeartsongsLoving  
Through  
Heartsongs

## Mattie's CD:

Music  
Through  
Heartsongs**Welcome to Mattie's Website!**

**UPDATE ON MATTIE:** Mattie died at Children's National Medical Center in Washington D.C. on Tuesday, June 22, according to a statement from the hospital. He had been hospitalized since early March for complications related to the disease that weakened most of his body's major functions. Mattie was 13 and is survived by his mom Jenny.

Mattie was something special, something very special. Entertainer Jerry Lewis, who chairs the Muscular Dystrophy Association, said in a statement. His example made people want to reach for the best within themselves.

After the Jerry Lewis Labor Day Telethon, Mattie's site will be updated and maintained in his honor and to keep his messages of hope and peace alive and spreading.

Mattie J.T. Stepanek is a 13-year-old young man who was born with a rare neuromuscular disease called dysautonomic mitochondrial myopathy. His disease is one of the 43 types of diseases being researched by the Muscular Dystrophy Association.

Mattie has a sister, Katie, and two brothers, Steve and Jamie, who each died during early childhood from this same infant onset disease that affects Mattie. Mattie's mother, Jenny, has the adult onset form of this disease. She did not know that she would ever have the disease, or that she would pass such a disease on to her children until after she gave birth to them. Mattie lives with his mom and his service dog, Mcab, in Maryland.

Even though Mattie's form of this neuromuscular disease is a mutation and very, very rare and difficult to understand, his doctors have learned a lot about what it does to Mattie's body and some of the ways to help Mattie stay as healthy as possible. Mattie uses a wheelchair to get around, like his mom, Jenny. But he also needs a trach (a breathing tube in his neck/trachea), a ventilator (machine that breathes for him), lots of extra oxygen, a Brovack (tube into his heart for medicines and blood products), foot braces, and lots of other equipment. It may sound like a lot of stuff for a kid, but Mattie really knows how to celebrate life and play after every storm.

One of the things Mattie has done to help him cope with loss and continue celebrating life is to write. Since the age of three, Mattie has been dictating, recording, and writing poetry, short stories, and essays about many topics, such as grief, nature, love, disability, hope, life, and peace. He put together his first collection of poetry at age five for a school contest. At age 11, he became a New York Times bestselling author when his volumes of poetry were published. Now, he has had five books of Heartsongs poetry collections reach the New York Times bestseller lists. His second book, Journey Through Heartsongs, reached all the way to number one.

In addition to writing, Mattie loves public speaking. In his role as the National Goodwill Ambassador for the Muscular Dystrophy Association (MDA), Mattie does a lot of speaking about how the MDA helps kids and adults with neuromuscular diseases.

**FOR OUR WORLD**

We need to stop.  
Just stop.  
Stop for a moment.  
Before anybody  
Says or does anything  
That may hurt anyone else.  
We need to be silent.  
Just silent.  
Silent for a  
moment.  
Before we  
forever lose  
The blessing  
of songs  
That grow in  
our hearts.  
We need to notice.  
Just notice.  
Notice for a moment.  
Before the future slips away  
Into ashes and dust of humanity.  
Stop, be silent, and notice.  
In so many ways, we are the same.  
Our differences are unique treasures.  
We have, we are, a mosaic of gifts.  
To nurture, to offer, to accept.  
We need to be  
Just be.  
Be for a moment.  
Kind and gentle, innocent and trusting,  
Like children and lambs.  
Never judging or vengeful.  
Like the judging and vengeful.  
And now, let us pray,  
Different yet together,  
Before there is no earth, no life,  
No chance for peace.

**Mattie  
Stepanek**

Special

**The Jack  
Diamond  
Morning  
Show**

Thank you, all  
thank you. So  
asked me about  
have a ways  
my mom and  
how to even it

This was really  
message of hope  
in an even bigger  
thank people  
me, and let it  
going on.

Jack was doing  
announcing it  
didn't even know  
one of the people  
about a week  
excited when  
his beloved  
help, but I did  
really happen

Wow, this is  
Love, Mattie

**Messages**

September 12, 2001  
© Matthew Joseph Thaddeus Stepanek  
Used with permission from *Hope Through  
Heartsongs*, Hyperion, 2002



Mattie &amp; Bruce Cunningham

He also likes to speak about peace efforts and global tolerance. Mattie has spoken to school children and business leaders, medical personnel and church groups, fire fighters and Harley Davidson riders, all across America. Mattie loves talking to anyone who loves to listen, and then ask questions! One of his favorite speeches was when he got to introduce his hero, former President Jimmy Carter, at the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC.

Mattie has also shared his messages of hope and peace on many television programs. He has been on the Oprah Winfrey Show, Larry King Live, Good Morning America, Primetime, The Today Show, and many other programs many times. Every year, he also helps with the Jerry Lewis Labor Day Telethon. In 2002, he drove cross country with his mom, and friends, Sandy and Chris, to be in Los Angeles for the Telethon. He loved getting to see his country coast to coast from the van. In 2003, he was unable to travel because of a decline in his health, so he enjoyed co-hosting a 24 hours of the local Baltimore, MD station telethon.



Mattie &amp; Lance Bass

Mattie feels very lucky to have met many wonderful people during his journey through life. He has become close friends with lots of great people, including Jimmy Carter, Oprah Winfrey, Larry King, Christopher Cross, Lance Bass, and Billy Gilman. During 2003, Mattie and Billy Gilman collaborated on a CD project, Music Through Heart Songs. On the CD, Billy sings 12 of Mattie's poems that have been put to various styles of music, including Celtic, soft rock, Hawaiian, country, jazz, and pop-Christian style. One of his favorite tracks, I AM/Shades of Life, was made into a music video, where Mattie has a cameo.

Mattie also feels very blessed just to be alive at age 13. Children born with his disease do not usually live very long. Mattie knows that each day is a gift, and he makes the most of it. He says he gets his strength from God and his mom, and also from the people that become part of his circle of life. People tell me: "Inspire them." And that inspires me. It's a beautiful circle, and we all go around together, with and for each other. What a gift," says Mattie.

---

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Farewell

# Goodbye to a Poet

A rare disease claims the life of *Heartsongs* author and prodigy Mattie Stepanek, 13



*In 2001 Mattie Stepanek became a literary sensation with the publication of his poetry collection, Heart-songs. Despite a lifelong battle with a rare form of muscular dystrophy, he went on to publish four more volumes and become an eloquent advocate for children*

*and world peace. On June 22 he died at 13. His mother, Jeni, 44, who suffers from a form of the same disease that has now killed all four of her children, spoke to PEOPLE about her son:*

It's been a tough year. Mattie's heart stopped for 45 minutes in March, and nobody thought he'd wake up again. Yet he woke up, told jokes, talked of peace and astounded many people. His body wore out, but his spirit did not. He died after 1:30 p.m. this afternoon, and his body was still warm at 6 p.m.—his spirit was that strong. He suffered greatly over the last two weeks, but the last 10 minutes of his life were incredibly peaceful. I climbed out of my wheelchair and into bed with him and just held him, and I told him I loved him. He looked me in the eye and stopped moaning. I said to him, "You're everything God wanted you to be."

Somebody once asked Mattie, "How do you want the world to remember you?" And he said as a poet, a peacemaker and a philosopher who played. He always said, "When I die, have a big celebration for me." His hope was that he planted seeds and made a difference. He helped people understand that peace is a habit and a reality. He lived it. ●

Photograph by AMY ARBUS



His goal in life, Mattie (in '02 with Micah) once said, was to live to 101 and be "a poet, a peacemaker and a daddy."



## Residents Propose Naming New Park After Child Poet

By SONYA BURKE

**A**n effort is under way in King Farm to name the city of Rockville's new 28 acre park after Mattie Stepanek, the child writer who touched millions with his "Heart songs" poetry.

Stepanek, who passed away last June after a long struggle with a rare muscular disease, lived in King Farm with his mother, Jenni, and dog Micah.

In addition to writing several books, Stepanek was also a friend to the famous and powerful, including former U.S. President Jimmy Carter and Oprah Winfrey. He was the National Goodwill ambassador for the Muscular Dystrophy Association, a yearly participant in the yearly Jerry Lewis telethon, and a popular guest on television talk shows.

Soon after Stepanek passed away, his neighbors in King Farm started thinking about a way to

seemed to empower it. Therefore, it is requested that the park include provision for some activities for physically challenged people like Mattie. Attracting physically challenged people to the park will be a fitting tribute to his memory," wrote organizers of the King Farm movement to name the park in honor of Stepanek.

"Always remember to play after every storm," was his personal philosophy. On his web site (www.wmattieonline.com), he wrote that he wanted to be remembered as a "Poet, Peacemaker, and Philosopher ... Who Played."

"I have never met anyone like Mattie," said King Farm resident Robert Balkam, the father of eight children and 22 grand children, who lived near the Stepaneks. "He was the life of the party."

Andy Gordon, King Farm's

**STEPANEK PARK**

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**Mattie Stepanek**

remember his remarkable life. The city park, which is being built adjacent to Gaither Road in King Farm, may be the perfect tribute.

"Mattie lived daily with serious physical challenges that most of us will never know. Rather than dimming his spirit, they

## ■ STEPANEK PARK

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president, is helping spearhead the initiative. "It will honor an outstanding young person that made a major contribution to humanity and left us far too early," he wrote in an email.

Mayor Larry Giammo said he had received several emails about the proposal and that city leaders were supportive of the idea. "I think it is a formality, and in a month it will be a done deal," said Giammo.

Jeni Stepanek still lives in King Farm and says she was excited to learn of the move and to name the park after her beloved son.

"It is every parent's dream for their child's life to be meaningful. It is a wonderful feeling," said Jeni.

A frequent visitor to Starbucks, Maggie Moos, and the video store, King Farm had a special place in Mattie Stepanek's heart. "King Farm was built for people like Mattie ... He loved to go out the door and go

shopping," Jeni said.

Jeni said Mattie could often be seen traveling to the park and through the gazebo. She said he was thrilled when they installed the chessboard tables at the Village Center Park as the game was one of his favorite pastimes.

Stepanek often said that if people sat down and played chess over a cup of tea that they could work out their differences. At the time of his death, he was writing a book with President Carter entitled "Just Peace: A Message of Hope" that will soon be published.

Jeni says she gets thousands of emails each week from people who were touched by her son's words and messages. "Mattie was somebody who stood for the future ... what love is about. ... I hope it happens so his spirit of peace, friendship and community will live for a long time," she said.

*Editor's Note: If you would like to see the park named after Mattie Stepanek please send a letter of support to the city of Rockville's Parks and Recreation Board in care of Director But Hall. His email is [bhall@rockvillemd.gov](mailto:bhall@rockvillemd.gov).*